

Theology: Orthodoxy Forged in Battle

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1. Introduction

The orderly presentation of the first ten essays may give the impression that Christian doctrine was originally conceived as a deliberate, pre-planned system, carefully organized in advance like the doctrinal statements modern churches draft when forming their confessions. The historical reality is quite the opposite.

Orthodox Christian doctrine did not arise from a premeditated theological blueprint but emerged through *centuries of conflict, debate, and discernment*. The church was repeatedly compelled to examine false teachings, measure them against the Scriptures, and reject them when found wanting. In this long process of testing and clarification, error was stripped away, and what remained—after the dust of controversy settled—is what the church came to recognize as orthodox Christian doctrine.

Many of these doctrines were formally addressed in what later came to be known as the ecumenical councils convened during the first eight centuries of the church's life. Other doctrinal questions arose after the great division between the Eastern Church (centered in Constantinople) and the Western Church (centered in Rome) in the eleventh century, and especially during the Protestant Reformation beginning in 1519 under figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. These later developments, while profoundly influential, never received the universal recognition that characterized the early ecumenical decisions. As a result, the doctrinal landscape after the medieval schism and the Reformation reflects a more fragmented history, with significant teachings affirmed within particular traditions rather than by the whole church.

However, despite the later fragmentation of the Christian world, all three major branches of the contemporary Christian family—Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and the various Protestant traditions—remain united in affirming the **foundational doctrines** articulated in the first two ecumenical councils, expressed in what is commonly called the **Nicene Creed**. A copy of that creed is included at the end of this essay. These affirmations constitute the core of historic Christian orthodoxy. Any individual, congregation, or denomination that can sincerely endorse the Nicene Creed stands within the boundaries of orthodox Christianity, regardless of later doctrinal distinctives or denominational developments.

2. Marcion and the First Major Challenge (c. 85–160)

Historical Setting: Marcion of Sinope emerged in the mid-second century as one of the earliest and most disruptive figures to challenge the developing Christian faith. Arriving in Rome around A.D. 140, he quickly gained influence through his wealth, organizational skill, and aggressive promotion of his theological views.

Doctrinal Position: Marcion rejected the Old Testament entirely, insisting that the God of Israel was a lesser, inferior deity distinct from the Father of Jesus Christ. He denied any continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel and constructed his own sharply edited canon consisting of a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel and ten Pauline letters stripped of Jewish elements. His theology was fundamentally dualistic, anti-Jewish, and docetic, denying the true humanity of Christ.

Orthodox Response: The church's response to Marcion forced early Christian leaders to articulate several foundational convictions: the unity of Scripture as one coherent revelation from the one true God; the goodness of creation; the full incarnation of the Son; and the legitimacy of the emerging New Testament canon. In opposing Marcion, the church affirmed that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God who spoke through the Law and the Prophets, and that the gospel stands in organic continuity with the entire biblical narrative.

3. Gnosticism and the Defense of Apostolic Faith (2nd–3rd Centuries)

Historical Setting: Gnosticism was not a single movement but a broad family of teachings that flourished in the second and third centuries, often associated with figures such as **Valentinus (c. 100–160)** and **Basilides (early 2nd century)**. These teachers blended elements of Christianity with speculative mythology, Greek philosophical dualism, and esoteric “secret knowledge.” Gnosticism spread rapidly in urban centers of the Roman Empire and posed one of the earliest and most pervasive threats to the developing Christian faith.

Doctrinal Position: Gnostic systems typically taught a radical dualism between spirit (good) and matter (evil). They denied the goodness of creation, rejected the full humanity of Christ, and reinterpreted salvation as escape from the material world through secret, mystical knowledge (*gnōsis*). Many Gnostics claimed that the true God was distinct from the Creator of the physical world and that Christ only appeared to be human (a docetic Christology). Their teachings undermined the incarnation, the atonement, and the historical nature of the gospel.

Orthodox Response: The church's response to Gnosticism was led most notably by **Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202)**, whose work *Against Heresies* became the definitive refutation of Gnostic teaching. In opposing Gnosticism, the church affirmed the goodness of creation, the true and complete humanity of Christ, the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and the public, apostolic nature of Christian teaching. The orthodox leaders insisted that salvation is grounded not in secret knowledge but in the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, proclaimed openly by the apostles and preserved in the Scriptures.

4. Sabellianism and the Clarification of the Trinity (3rd Century)

Historical Setting: Sabellianism, also known as *Modalism* or *Modalistic Monarchianism*, arose in the early third century and is associated primarily with **Sabellius**, a theologian active around A.D. 215. His teachings gained traction in parts of North Africa and Rome, appealing to Christians who wished to defend the unity of God against what they perceived as tritheistic tendencies in emerging Trinitarian language.

Doctrinal Position: Sabellius taught that God is a single divine Person who reveals Himself in three sequential “modes” or “manifestations”: first as the Father in creation, then as the Son in redemption, and finally as the Holy Spirit in sanctification. According to this view, the distinctions among Father, Son, and Spirit are not eternal personal distinctions within the Godhead but temporary roles adopted by the one God at different times. This effectively collapses the Trinity into a single-person deity and denies the real, eternal relationships revealed in Scripture.

Orthodox Response: The church rejected Sabellianism because it undermined the genuine personal distinctions within the Godhead and made the Father’s relationship to the Son merely a dramatic role rather than an eternal reality. Early theologians such as **Tertullian (c. 155–220)** argued forcefully that God is one in essence but three in person, coexisting eternally rather than appearing sequentially. In refuting Sabellius, the church affirmed the full, eternal deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and clarified that the Trinity is not a set of temporary manifestations but the eternal identity of the one true God.

5. Arianism and the Council of Nicaea (325)

Historical Setting: Arianism arose in the early fourth century and is associated with **Arius (c. 256–336)**, a presbyter in Alexandria. Around A.D. 318, Arius began teaching views about the Son that quickly ignited the *most significant doctrinal crisis of the early church*. His ideas spread rapidly throughout the Eastern Empire, aided by political support and the simplicity of his slogans. The controversy became so widespread and divisive that Emperor Constantine convened the **Council of Nicaea in 325** to address the issue.

Doctrinal Position: Arius taught that the Son of God was not eternal but a created being—the highest of creatures, exalted above all others, yet still a creature. His famous claim, “There was when He was not,” denied the eternal pre-existence of the Son. According to Arius, the Son did not share the same divine essence as the Father but was of a similar or subordinate essence. This view undermined the full deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the very foundation of salvation, since a created being could not accomplish the redemption of humanity.

Orthodox Response: The church responded decisively at the **Council of Nicaea (325)**, affirming that the Son is **homoousios**—“of the same essence”—with the Father. This term was chosen specifically to exclude the Arian claim that the Son was a creature. **Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373)** became the chief defender of Nicene orthodoxy, arguing that only one

who is truly God can save. The church affirmed the eternal generation of the Son, His full deity, and His equality with the Father. The Nicene Creed became the **definitive statement of orthodox Trinitarian faith** and remains the central doctrinal boundary of Christianity to this day.

6. Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus (381, 431)

Historical Setting: Apollinarianism arose in the mid-fourth century and is associated with **Apollinaris of Laodicea (d. 390)**, a respected bishop and defender of Nicene orthodoxy. In his zeal to protect the full deity of Christ against Arianism, Apollinaris proposed a Christological explanation that unintentionally compromised Christ's true humanity. His views gained influence in Syria and Asia Minor and became a significant controversy in the decades following the Council of Nicaea.

Doctrinal Position: Apollinaris taught that in the incarnation, the divine Logos took the place of the rational human soul (*nous*) in Jesus Christ. In his model, Christ possessed a human body and a sensitive soul but not a rational human mind; instead, the divine Logos functioned as Christ's mind. This view was intended to safeguard the unity of Christ's person and the certainty of His sinlessness, but it effectively denied that Christ was fully human. According to Apollinaris, Christ was "God in a body," not truly God and truly man.

Orthodox Response: The church rejected Apollinarianism because it undermined the completeness of Christ's humanity and therefore the reality of human redemption. The **Council of Constantinople (381)** condemned Apollinaris's teaching and affirmed that Christ assumed the fullness of human nature—body, soul, and rational mind. Orthodox leaders insisted that "what is not assumed is not healed," meaning that Christ must possess a complete human nature in order to redeem humanity fully. The church upheld the doctrine that Jesus Christ is one person with two complete natures, divine and human, united without confusion or diminishment.

7. Nestorianism (5th Century)

Historical Setting: Nestorianism arose in the early fifth century and is associated with **Nestorius (c. 386–451)**, who became Patriarch of Constantinople in A.D. 428. Nestorius entered a theological environment already tense with debates about how to articulate the relationship between Christ's divine and human natures. His preaching and public objections to certain liturgical expressions—especially the title *Theotokos* ("God-bearer") for Mary—sparked widespread controversy. The dispute escalated quickly, drawing in major theological centers such as Alexandria and Antioch and culminating in the **Council of Ephesus in 431**.

Doctrinal Position: Nestorius emphasized the distinction between Christ's divine and human natures to such an extent that he appeared to divide Christ into **two separate persons**—the divine Son of God and the human Jesus—united only by a moral or cooperative bond. His

rejection of the title *Theotokos* was rooted in this separation: he argued that Mary gave birth only to the human Christ, not to the divine Son. This position threatened the unity of Christ's person and undermined the reality of the incarnation, in which the eternal Son truly became man without ceasing to be God.

Orthodox Response: The **Council of Ephesus (431)**, led by **Cyril of Alexandria**, condemned Nestorianism and affirmed the **unity of Christ's person**. The church declared that the one born of Mary is truly the eternal Son of God incarnate, and therefore Mary may rightly be called *Theotokos*. The council upheld that Christ is **one person in two natures**, fully divine and fully human, without separation or division. This affirmation safeguarded the truth that the same person who is God the Son is also the one who lived, suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation.

8. Eutychianism and the Council of Chalcedon (451)

Historical Setting: Eutychianism arose in the mid-fifth century and is associated with **Eutyches (c. 380–456)**, an elderly monk in Constantinople who had long opposed Nestorianism. In his attempt to defend the unity of Christ's person against what he perceived as excessive division, Eutyches advanced a Christological explanation that quickly drew criticism. His teachings became the center of controversy leading up to the **Council of Chalcedon in 451**, one of the most decisive doctrinal moments in church history.

Doctrinal Position: Eutyches taught that after the incarnation, Christ had only **one nature**, a fusion in which His humanity was absorbed or overwhelmed by His divinity. This view—often summarized as “one nature after the union”—effectively denied the full and continuing reality of Christ's human nature. In Eutyches's formulation, Christ was not truly consubstantial with humanity, since His humanity was not preserved in its integrity. This position, known as *Monophysitism*, threatened both the reality of the incarnation and the basis of human redemption.

Orthodox Response: The **Council of Chalcedon (451)** condemned Eutychianism and issued the **Chalcedonian Definition**, which remains the classical statement of orthodox Christology. The council affirmed that Jesus Christ is **one person in two natures**, divine and human, united “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” This declaration preserved both the full deity and the full humanity of Christ and ensured that the incarnate Son is truly consubstantial with us in His humanity and consubstantial with the Father in His divinity. Chalcedon thus provided the definitive boundary against both Nestorian division and Eutychian fusion.

9. The Iconoclast Controversy and the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787)

Historical Setting: The Iconoclast controversy arose in the eighth century within the Byzantine Empire and unfolded in two major phases (726–787 and 814–843). It began under **Emperor Leo**

III (r. 717–741), who ordered the removal and destruction of religious images (*icons*) throughout the empire. His son, **Constantine V**, intensified the campaign, promoting a theological rationale for icon destruction and persecuting those who defended their use. The controversy divided the Eastern Church for more than a century and prompted the convening of the **Second Council of Nicaea in 787**.

Doctrinal Position: The Iconoclasts argued that the use of icons in Christian worship violated the Second Commandment and amounted to idolatry. They claimed that no material image could represent the divine nature and that portraying Christ inevitably confused His humanity and divinity. Some Iconoclast theologians insisted that any depiction of Christ either denied His divinity (by portraying only His humanity) or denied His humanity (by refusing to portray Him at all). Their position effectively rejected the legitimacy of sacred images and sought to eliminate them from Christian devotion and liturgical life.

Orthodox Response: The **Second Council of Nicaea (787)** condemned Iconoclasm and affirmed the legitimacy of icons as a natural extension of the incarnation. Because the eternal Son truly became man, taking on visible, material flesh, He may be depicted in His humanity without compromising His divinity. The council distinguished between **veneration** (*proskynēsis*), which may be given to icons, and **worship** (*latreia*), which belongs to God alone. Orthodox leaders taught that honor shown to an icon passes to the prototype it represents, not to the material object itself. This affirmation preserved both the reality of the incarnation and the proper boundaries of Christian worship. The final triumph of icon veneration in 843, known as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy,” remains a defining moment in Eastern Christian history.

10. Conclusion: Orthodoxy as the Faith That Endured

Across the first millennium, Christian doctrine was not pre-constructed but **hammered out on the anvil of controversy**, shaped and tempered through the church’s repeated encounters with false teaching. Orthodoxy is the faith that survived these battles—the doctrines that withstood the arrows of error and emerged refined, clarified, and strengthened. Across the first eight centuries of the church, Christian doctrine did not develop as a tidy, pre-planned system but as the hard-won result of conflict, correction, and confession. Each major controversy forced the church to clarify what Scripture teaches and to articulate the boundaries of the faith once delivered to the saints.

From the challenge of **Marcion**, who rejected the Old Testament, to the speculative dualism of **Gnosticism**, the church affirmed the unity of God’s revelation and the goodness of His creation. Through the errors of **Sabellianism** and **Arianism**, the church was compelled to articulate the eternal distinctions within the Godhead and the full deity of the Son.

The Christological controversies of the fifth century—**Apollinarianism**, **Nestorianism**, and **Eutychianism**—pressed the church to define with precision how Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, one person in two natures. These debates culminated in the doctrinal clarity of the Councils of Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, which together established the framework

of orthodox Christology. Even later disputes such as **Iconoclasm** required the church to reaffirm the reality of the incarnation and the proper distinction between veneration and worship.

Taken together, these controversies reveal that orthodoxy is not the product of philosophical speculation or ecclesiastical politics but the enduring testimony of the church as it measured every teaching against the Scriptures. Error served as the refining fire through which truth was clarified. Heresy forced the church to say not only what it believed but why it believed it. The ecumenical councils did not create doctrine; they preserved it. They gave voice to what the church already confessed in worship, proclamation, and Scripture.

Thus, the core of Christian orthodoxy—summarized in the Nicene Creed—stands as the faith that survived the testing of centuries. It is the doctrinal center shared by Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and the Protestant traditions. The creed remains the universal boundary of the Christian faith: any person or community that can affirm its truths stands within the stream of historic Christianity.

Orthodoxy, then, is not merely a set of propositions but the living confession of the church,

*forged in battle,
purified through controversy, and
anchored in the unchanging Word of God.*

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Nicene Creed (A.D. 325–381, Standard English Form)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Recommended Reading

For Young Readers and Laypersons

- **The Story of the Bible** — Larry Stone. A richly illustrated, accessible overview of how the Bible came to be, ideal for teens and adults new to church history.
- **Christian History Made Easy** — Timothy Paul Jones. A friendly, engaging introduction to major events, people, and controversies in early Christianity.
- **The Drama of Scripture** — Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen. A readable narrative of the Bible's storyline that helps younger readers see the unity of Scripture.
- **Know the Creeds and Councils** — Justin Holcomb. A short, clear guide to the major creeds, councils, and heresies of the early church.
- **The Ology: Ancient Truths Ever New** — Marty Machowski. A beautifully illustrated introduction to Christian doctrine for older children and teens.

For Scholars and Advanced Students

- **Against Heresies** — Irenaeus of Lyons. The foundational refutation of Gnosticism and a primary source for second-century theology.
- **On the Incarnation** — Athanasius. A classic defense of the deity of Christ and a central text in the Arian controversy.
- **The Christological Controversy** — ed. Richard Norris. A collection of primary sources from Apollinarian, Nestorian, and Eutychian debates with scholarly commentary.
- **The Seven Ecumenical Councils** — Philip Schaff, ed. The standard English collection of council documents, including Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon.
- **Early Christian Doctrines** — J. N. D. Kelly. A definitive scholarly survey of doctrinal development in the first five centuries.
- **The Formation of Christian Doctrine** — John Behr. A rigorous academic treatment of how early Christian theology emerged through controversy.
- **The Orthodox Way**